

Accessibility in Universities

Support for students is growing, but key challenges remain.

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Homeless in the City: Support and Difficulties

INSIDE THEIR LIVES AND HOPES

By Tania AIT-MEDDOUR,
Thomas S. BROWN,
Ngoc Mai TRUONG

The world is working to end homelessness. People living without a home in central Nagoya are at the center of this serious problem. One homeless man shared his thoughts with us with a steady gaze: “...no one wants to die unknown.” What can our society do for them? Through the voices and stories of Nagoya’s homeless people and those in government who support them, we explored the current situation and solutions.

An Inside View of Daily Life in Nagoya’s Homeless Community

We visited and interviewed local homeless people where they live. Their homes are small tents lined up like a village under an overhead motorway in central Nagoya, covered with blue tarps and partitioned off with cardboard.

“The Big Boss,” who greeted us, said: “I did a lot of construction work as well as long-distance transport work. But as time went on, it became more difficult due to the physical strain and I had to quit.” He is referred to as “The Big Boss” because he is something of a community leader for the homeless in Nagoya. “I felt that someone had to hold things together. If someone doesn’t do that, there will be fights and incidents,” he continued.

According to a survey by the Nagoya City Health & Welfare Bureau, homeless people in their 50s–70s, like “The Big Boss,” make up more than 97% of the area’s homeless population. They support themselves by collecting cans and bottles in the city every day and converting them into money. They also receive support from the community.

The City of Nagoya helps connect homeless people to different services and shelters. We spoke with Ms. Chika Ichihara, a Nagoya City social-welfare officer, who outlined the city’s assistance measures. “If they are able to work,” Ms. Ichihara explained, referring to an information pamphlet, “they are sent to a place called the Nagoya City Work and Living Independence Support Center.”

“In Nagoya City, people can seek help at any ward office; if someone goes in and says, ‘I don’t have a home,’ staff will consult with them.”

A visiting public health nurse said,



Above: Makeshift structures serve as the base of life for the homeless... Right: Municipal official Ms. Ichihara (left) explains the homeless support measures implemented by Nagoya City, Aichi Pref.



“When I make my rounds to check on the health of the homeless individuals, I call for an ambulance if necessary or recommend that they go to the hospital. I also take blood pressure reading and provide first aid for injuries.”

The plan for promoting self-reliance in Nagoya City consists of seven steps: (1) securing and settling into housing; (2) securing and retaining employment opportunities; (3) maintaining and restoring mental and physical health; (4) consultation and support; (5) protection and respect of human rights; (6) maintenance and improvement of the living environment in the region; and (7) collaboration with private organizations and local welfare.

Ain’t Nobody’s Problem—Issues Local Homeless People Face

Beyond the daily challenges already described, Nagoya’s homeless people face other serious problems. Another homeless person we interviewed explained that those being helped by organizations can just as easily get caught up in red tape and forgotten. “I’m currently facing that situation,” he admitted somewhat reluctantly. The problem does not stop there. Various incidents of homeless people being brushed aside in times of crisis have been reported across Japan. Earlier this year, in Gifu of this year, a homeless man died due to neglect when his emergency 119 call was ignored by first responders, reported by the Asahi Shimbun.

The reluctance of the homeless themselves to receive assistance also makes it difficult to resolve the situation. According to a survey by the City of Nagoya, 96% of homeless people said they do not intend to use the assistance available to

them. Regarding jobs, a national survey also found that the percentage of homeless people interested in finding work has declined to just 14.6% over the past 20 years. Job-seeking is further complicated by an aging population.

Everyone Requires a Plan—Comparison with Other Countries

How does Japan’s homeless population compare to other countries? Some argue that Japan’s official definition downplays the reality because it excludes people who lack a permanent residence but do not live on the streets. “A homeless community is a group of people living in shelters or temporary enclosures. Some people stay in shelters, while others need to find jobs or rent apartments. Sometimes, life ends up being in a shelter, but there are also people who just want to spend time happily and peacefully with their friends,” said Ms. Ichihara.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Japan’s definition is as follows: “...those who use city parks, riverbanks, roads, train stations and other facilities as their place of stay in order to live their daily lives.” Other countries, such

as the United States and France, define it in much broader contexts.

It seems, in Nagoya anyway, that there are a variety of resources and helping hands available to the homeless community. In other words, Japanese society has not entirely forgotten them. But the reality is that many homeless Japanese people—like “The Big Boss”—choose to forgo accepting help. According to a pamphlet provided by the City of Nagoya, 47.9% of surveyed homeless people see living on the streets as perfectly acceptable for the foreseeable future. The reasons why remain a much bigger question. Perhaps it is a component of Japanese culture. In Japanese society, it is considered better to blend in than to stand out. Perhaps homeless people feel it is better to be invisible than to be a burden to others. Or perhaps they simply do not want to work.

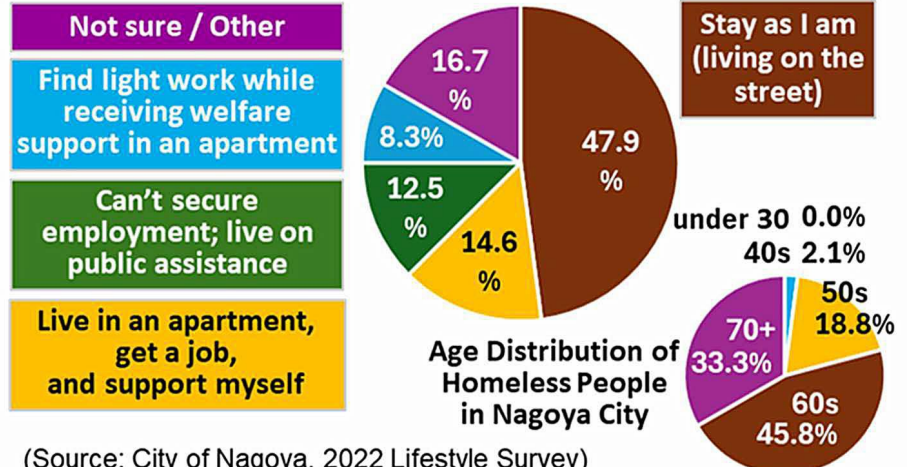
Regardless of the reason, official surveys suggest that many homeless people, in Nagoya anyway, would rather be perceived as invisible than to accept a helping hand.

When we asked “The Big Boss” what message he would like to share with the world, he paused for a moment, then quietly recited a poem, his own words, written from the depths of lived experience:

Aspiration—
a world of distant, distant repentance.
Even in enlightenment, to find one night of light
is perhaps just another fleeting moment in this floating world.

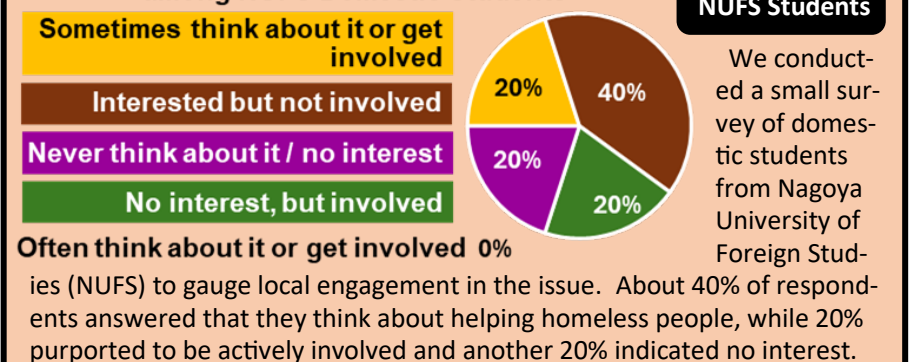
—Still, one must live with hope.

Q: What do you want your future life to look like?



(Source: City of Nagoya, 2022 Lifestyle Survey)

Engagement with Helping Homeless People among NUFS Domestic Students



Society

By Lauren V. KIRNON,
Kylee D. MARTIN,
Elizabeth W. WAMBUGU

Accessibility has often been overlooked in the past. However, many modern countries and institutions have made significant efforts to accommodate those with mental health struggles and learning disabilities. In much of the Western world, such support systems are now considered essential and are widely implemented. So how does Japan compare in terms of accessibility and support for people with these struggles? In this article, we highlight areas of improvement, drawing on firsthand accounts from Japanese domestic and international students at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS) and Nagoya University of Arts and Sciences (NUAS), along with interviews of university consulting staff and national data. We also consider where and how Japan can improve in the future.

According to the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), the number of students disclosing disabilities to their universities is steadily increasing. In 2018, 33,812 students registered. By 2023, that number had risen to 58,141. This suggests a gradual reduction in the stigma surrounding disability and mental health in Japan.

However, despite the rising demand, the 2023 JASSO survey shows that only 29.3% of Japanese universities have formal support systems in place for students with disabilities or mental health concerns. Japan is making progress, but compared to countries like the U.S. and the U.K., where mental health outreach and academic accommodations are more standardized, Japanese universities still have room to grow.

Our own anonymous survey of students focused on accessibility at NUFS and NUAS, covering physical, academic, and mental health support. With 24 responses (mostly from NUFS), the survey included both international students (58.3%) and domestic students (41.7%). The findings reveal signs of progress but also areas needing urgent attention.

When asked if they had ever felt anxious, depressed, or overwhelmed due to university-related stress, 91% of students said “Yes.” Yet many reported hesitating to seek help. One student shared, “People acknowledging that mental health really matters and that I can express how I feel without feeling judged would be a step forward.” Only 54.2% of students knew about mental health services on their campus. By comparison, in American universities, the *2022 College Student Mental Health Report* showed that 81% of students knew of the mental health services on their campus. Several noted that international students receive direct email notifications about support services, while domestic students often rely on bulletin boards for updates.

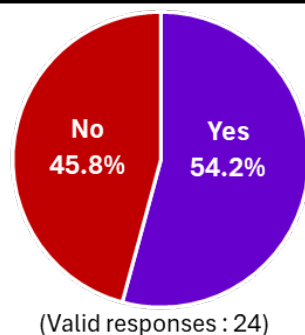
One student voiced concern about

SUPPORT FOR ACCESSIBILITY

Progress and Challenges in Japanese Universities



Q: Do you know any mental health services offered by the university?



Above: The University Health Center in Les Halles in Nisshin campus, a consultation hub for mental health. **Below:** Interview with the staff members of the Health Center, Nisshin City, Aichi Pref.



privacy, saying, “I know there are services, but I’m worried the university will record what’s on my mind and use it against me.” These comments reflect both service gaps and trust and communication issues between students and the university.

NUFS has official guidelines for supporting students with disabilities. A support team made up of the Academic Affairs Office, the Student Support Center, and the University Health Center works together to provide accommodations.

For example, the university once installed a special locker for a student who could not carry heavy textbooks due to a physical disability. For mental health, the Health Center serves as a consultation hub. Students can access free counseling services, located on the first floor of Les Halles. The center offers guidance, one-on-one consultations, and referrals to specialists when needed.

Additionally, all first- and second-year students are assigned a faculty class advisor for academic and personal support. Third- and fourth-year students can consult with their seminar professors or senior peers. While these systems exist, many students remain unaware of them. This suggests a communication gap rather than a lack of services.

We asked the staff members at the NUFS and NUAS Health Center about ways to improve awareness. The staff explained, “We distribute pamphlets to all students. The pamphlet specifically covers about mental health services. It explains the types of counselors available, when doctors are on campus, and how students can get help.”

All services are free of charge. For mental health services, reminders are usually posted on bulletin boards, but no regular emails are sent.

Students can also access a two-layer support system. First, they can meet with the staff of the Health Management Center. If needed, the staff can refer them to a specialist.

Every spring, students complete a mandatory health checkup, including a mental health questionnaire. If a student’s answers suggest they need support, the university sends an email inviting them to a consultation. However, as the staff noted, “In the end, it’s up to the student whether they choose to come or not.”

When asked about the broader cultural situation in Japan, the staff responded, “Compared to before, more people are managing their own mental health because society is becoming more aware. In the past, people didn’t talk about mental health at all. Now, students are reading about it, learning, and sometimes initiating visits to hospitals or clinics on their own. It’s a trend, but the stigma is still there.” This reflects a slow but positive shift in how mental health is viewed in Japan, though challenges remain.

In countries like the U.S., many universities require teachers to complete yearly mental health training. We asked if something similar exists at NUFS. The staff explained, “Currently, no. We don’t have mandatory mental health training for all teachers. Implementing something like this would require careful planning. There are

logistical and systemic challenges, and it would be difficult to enforce for every faculty member.”

There are occasional faculty development sessions once or twice a year. If faculty members request guidance on how to support students with mental health issues, the university provides that guidance. Some professors have expressed concern about overstepping, saying, “We’re not specialists, so it’s better to refer students to professionals.” The staff members agreed that while faculty can listen, directing students to proper services is often the best approach.

We also asked about students with learning disabilities. Some of our survey respondents reported difficulties receiving accommodations. The staff explained, “When students first enter the university, they fill out a health questionnaire. If they check the box indicating a learning disability, we contact them, invite them to come in, and ask what kind of accommodations they need. Then we coordinate with the appropriate department.” This outreach happens only during the first year. After that, students need to initiate the process themselves if they require support.

If a student needs extra time for exams or special equipment, they must submit a doctor’s note and complete a university form. This is forwarded to the Academic Affairs Office, which shares the information with the student’s faculty.

The university follows Japan’s concept of reasonable accommodation, meaning adjustments are made as reasonably as possible. The staff explained, “We don’t always have to follow a strict rule. Some things we can do; some things we can’t. It must be a mutual agreement. Teachers generally try to cooperate, but depending on the class or situation, there might be limitations.”

One male NUFS student, who struggles with anxiety and depression, shared, “I don’t feel supported by the university unless I bring up personal issues directly. I wish I could talk to someone who understands how I feel.” When we informed him about the counseling services available, he was surprised and said he would start reaching out. This shows the need for better promotion of services so that students are aware of their options.

While some students desperately need support, the reality remains that many of the services universities offer are underused. This may be partly due to the complex psychology surrounding mental health in Japan, where fear of prejudice still makes it difficult for students to seek help. However, managing everything alone is not always the best solution.

It is also challenging for universities to fully understand what students are going through unless students come forward. But the door is open. Support is available, and seeking help from staff members who are ready to listen may be the first step toward change.

By Alexandra M. BATTLE,
Koyo Hioki, Jou-Tung SHIH

While walking the streets of Japan, especially in the cities, one might see people of all ages walking around in frilly clothing fit for an antique doll. This is Lolita fashion, a popular street style that emerged in its current form in the 1990s. Lolita fashion didn't start in a vacuum, however. It started much earlier, stemming from *Otome* and *Dolly Kei* fashion styles in the early 1970s and 80s. Let's dive into the box of bows that is the past and present of this fashion.

We interviewed Ms. Lucy Glasspool, an associate professor at NUFF and practitioner of Lolita fashion. When asked about how Lolita grew as large as it did, she says that it was likely due to home internet becoming widespread. She says "people started seeing Lolita characters in girls' anime..." and while people were confused at first, "people began searching for what Lolita fashion is, what it is for, the brands involved." Even now, personal internet connections are growing the fashion and the understanding of what Lolita truly is.

On apps like Instagram and TikTok, if you search "#ロリータ" or "#LolitaFashion" you may find over 500,000 posts. The posts accumulate and increase day by day and contribute to generating new styles of expression. One video may be the pretty and pink Classic Lolita style with pink bows and petticoats dancing to an upbeat J-pop hit, while the very next is a Lolita bathed in black and purple sporting Gothic Lolita to a soulful piano concerto.

Lolita fashion today is no longer just about expressing cuteness—it has become a symbol of self-expression, rebellion, and emotional refuge. As P. R. Hinton, a Lolita fashion researcher, explained in his writings (2013), wearing Lolita allows the individual to step into the role of a doll-like *shōjo* (a young-girl figure idealized in Japanese media) entering a fantasy world free from adult responsibilities. Drawing from Japan's doll culture and festivals like *Hina Matsuri* (Girls' Day, a festival displaying ornamental dolls), Lolita creates a safe space where identity is performed, not imposed—until the wearer returns to everyday life.

As Lolita fashion spread, specialty stores and gathering places expanded, too. The most popular community is said to be in the crowded subculture-filled streets of Harajuku, Tokyo.

However, the style is thriving domestically as well. In Nagoya, the Osu district, known for its arcades and long-standing youth subculture, remains one of the sanctuaries of Lolita fashion outside Tokyo. Once you walk the Osu streets you can feel the Nagoya style Lolita fashion. The culture of Lolita fashion is widely recognized. However, perceptions of this fashion differ between Japan and other countries.

In 1984, if you walked the streets

LOLITA: THEN AND NOW

Pretty Pink Revolt in Japanese Subcultures

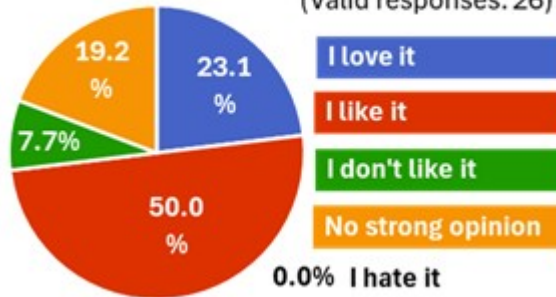


Our Interviewees, Ms. Yamawaki and Ms. Matsui, showcasing their contrasting Classic and Gothic Lolita styles, Nissin City, Aichi Pref.



Ms. Glasspool, Associate Professor at NUFF

Q: How do you feel about this fashion? (Valid responses: 26)



of Tokyo and other cities such as Nagoya, you'd see the emergence of Otome fashion. Girls in flowing skirts that covered their knees and long cardigans that gave the essence of grandma's closet were everywhere. A far cry from the short skirts and leather jackets that were popular just 10 years earlier in the 1970s. But both of these fashions walked the runway of Japanese streets due to the social reform brought on by Japanese youth wanting to push back against the older generation. Young people wanted to push back against the ideals of the adults that came before them, and this showed the most when it came to their fashion. The 1970s saw a boom in punk and rebel style fashions before switching to a more freeform and youthful style in the 1980s, of which Otome was a part.

Emerging from the neon-lit streets of Harajuku in the early 1990s, Lolita fashion found its footing during a time of deep social and economic uncertainty in Japan. As the country reeled from the burst of the economic bubble, many young women turned to fashion not only as a form of self-expression, but as a means of emotional escape. With frills, lace, and doll-like silhouettes inspired by Victorian and Rococo aesthetics, Lolita offered a fantasy world far removed from the pressures of adulthood.

Yet, by the 2010s, the movement faced setbacks. The rise of fast fashion, economic pressures, and shifting tastes made Lolita's costly and

time-consuming aesthetic harder to sustain. Major publications like *Gothic & Lolita Bible* ceased circulation, and the term Lolita was often misread as being sexualized, creating discomfort and stigma for wearers.

Ms. Glasspool highlights how early publications like

the *Gothic & Lolita Bible* actively promoted DIY creativity: "If you bought magazines like *Lolita Bible*, they had patterns in them, obviously meant for you to make your own clothes. It is literally called the Bible because it was intended for creators to make their own clothes." Originally, Lolita fashion embraced handmade craftsmanship and personal expression, but increasing commercialization has gradually shifted it toward exclusivity and consumer status.

On the other hand, as a fashion based on an antique image of luxury, Lolita is highly commodified in Japan and very expensive. An outfit can easily cost over ¥100,000, and the market strongly favors ready-made clothing over handmade pieces. As Ms. Glasspool explains, many companies deliberately discourage DIY efforts in favor of brand consumption. Among enthusiasts, strong brand loyalty often creates unspoken hierarchies, where individuals who sew their own clothes or buy from less popular brands may be viewed as less authentic. Although such judgments are seldom voiced directly, Ms. Glasspool observes, "They might just think you're not as good a Lolita as they are." She further describes Lolita as "almost certainly the most elitist" among Harajuku subcultures. Although the style allows for some flexibility, parts of the community are known for their snobbish attitudes, particularly when it comes to brand fidelity and consumption.

Despite this decline, Lolita fashion

has persisted. For many, it became more than just a style—it evolved into a quiet, symbolic rebellion against mainstream culture. Its strong emphasis on childlike innocence and fantasy has been interpreted as a gentle refusal to enter the adult world, particularly by young women navigating a society that often imposes rigid gender roles and expectations. In this sense, Lolita fashion represents more than frills and lace—it embodies a radical, self-determined reclaiming of identity, beauty, and autonomy through aesthetic resistance.

Ms. Glasspool also spoke about the use of Lolita as escapism. She shared a story of a Japanese office worker who, after her shifts, "takes off her suit, goes to her locker, and puts on her Lolita clothes" to escape the pressures of everyday life and her office job. Life as a Japanese office worker is known to be a stressful one—and it's no different for students. Through interviews and research, we explored how Lolita has changed and existed in modern times. To move beyond the myths and media portrayals, we decided to contact someone who wears Lolita as a lifestyle.

The interview was conducted with Ms. Azuchi Yamawaki and Ms. Rion Matsui, students who wear Lolita fashion in daily life. The clothes they wore were Lolita fashion, but the inspirations were different. Ms. Yamawaki wore ribbons in her hair and on the cuffs on her shirt, with elegant frills on the shoulder. On the other hand, Ms. Matsui wore a black lace dress-like pinafore with a cute rabbit bag.

In the interview, they looked happy yet serious as they explained why they wear Lolita fashion. Both said their fundamental reasons were "self-expression" and "matching one's own mood." Ms. Matsui said "Lolita fashion is one of my favorite styles, so I choose what I wear based on my emotions." Moreover, Ms. Yamawaki responded, "the fashion is a kind of armor for me." Based on their statements, Lolita fashion supports self-expression and a sense of identity that can be difficult to find in modern life.

They also spoke about the current state of Lolita fashion. Both shared, "We hope that Lolita fashion becomes more widespread and familiar as a style" with smiling faces and passionate eyes. In the trends of Japanese society, people introduce parts of Lolita fashion in their clothes, such as headaddresses, and, based on our survey among NUFF students and their friends, more than 70% of people are interested in Lolita fashion. Moreover, among respondents with a positive impression of the style, more than 60% described it as "cute and attractive" and "good for self-expression." Many wearers use fashion to distance themselves from daily pressures. In Lolita, they are not office workers or students but something more whimsical, something more free from day-to-day stress. They are their truest selves in layers of tulle, petticoats, and blouses. They are Lolita.

Society

By Rukian KAWAKITA,
Ho Lung KWOK,
William J. LEUNG

Japan is one of the major economic powers in the world, but does prosperity translate into happiness? According to the *World Happiness Report 2025* produced in partnership with the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), Japan ranks 55th in overall happiness despite being an economic powerhouse. What is the cause of the low level of happiness among Japanese people? We explored what happiness means to them through a survey modeled after the report and an interview with a man who has a successful career.

For many Japanese adults, the day begins at the crack of dawn. Wake up, brush teeth, wash up, and eat a quick breakfast before darting out the door. While a fortunate few may live near their workplace or own a car, the vast majority rely on the country's crowded train system for their morning commute. Upon arrival, the workday begins in earnest. This means long hours of grueling, intense focus with few, if any, breaks. What starts as an eight-hour shift often stretches longer, as unexpected tasks and responsibilities pile on near the end of the day. By the time workers return home, often well after dark, exhaustion has set in. They collapse into bed, knowing the same demanding cycle awaits them the next morning. Life-styles vary, but this snapshot reflects a typical day for many people in Japan.

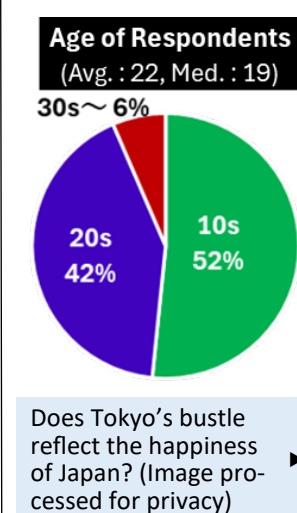
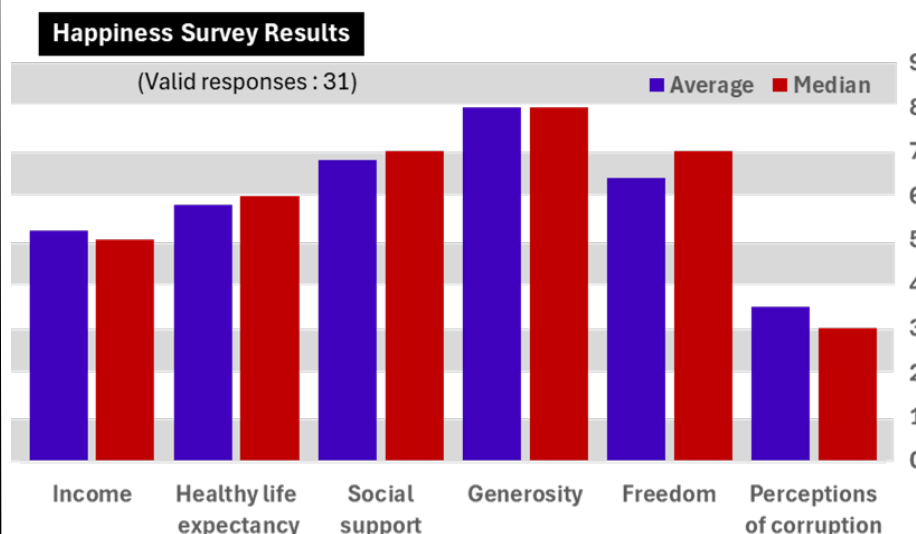
First of all, how should we define happiness? It can be understood as a state of contentment and satisfaction. This begs the obvious question: how can happiness be measured? On the surface, it seems fairly complex, attempting to measure a qualitative feeling on a quantitative scale. This coincides with the fact that everyone has different experiences, backgrounds, and values, which result in everyone having a different definition of happiness. Therefore, we defined happiness levels based on the *World Happiness Report*.

So... how does it work? In essence, the happiness index is a questionnaire designed to measure a person's well-being by measuring the following factors: social support, economic status, health life expectancy, freedom, generosity, and perceptions of government corruption. The questionnaire then asks the respondent where they would place their current life on a scale with 1 being their worst life and 10 being their best. This allows responses that are relative to each other to be normalized. For example, even if respondents have differing definitions of their best life, the questionnaire's design takes that into account by asking them to compare only to what they can imagine.

After laying out the concept of happiness, the next step is to examine what influences it. *The World Happiness Report* offers a solid approach by analyzing the factors that

Are Japanese People Leading Happy Lives?

INDEX & SURVEY SHOW REALITY



might explain those responses. These include income, emotional well-being, generosity, inequality, health, and social support. The impact of these elements is not uniform, as it tends to vary across different populations and regions. For example, the 2024 report shows Japan ranking at 28th for gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, which divides a country's total economic output by its population to roughly gauge the average income, while generosity ranks significantly lower at 130th. This contrast raises an important question: Which of these factors is the most influential in dictating happiness in Japan? With that in mind, the focus now shifts to the collected data.

As mentioned previously, there are six different metrics for the happiness index (see graph above). The first to take a look at is income. In our survey, the averaged response for each metric was almost equal to the median. This suggests that for the most part, respondents had similar viewpoints rather than polarizing takes. Looking more closely, most of the responses average out to being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their current life, as all the scores hover around 5–6. However, this could be a sign of apathy as opposed to an actual neutral response.

The outlier is the generosity metric with a whopping average of 8 and a

median of 8. This could mean a myriad of things. One possibility is that people are, on average, more generous; another is that people feel much less entitled to generosity and are therefore content.

The most concerning metric seems to be the lack of faith in the government. This could be due to the young population that was surveyed. It is widely observed that youth in Japan are less engaged in politics and thus can be more apathetic toward the overall situation.

While data can show a glimpse of what happiness may be like, it fails by removing the human experience. That is why taking a deeper dive into someone's life can give a much better view of what actually happens. For these reasons, we interviewed Mr. Satoshi Yasui, a certified financial planner and representative director of ARCATH Corporation. His journey and experience to date are not common, but they do give us hope.

Not long ago, Mr. Yasui was un-

happy with his career. He stated, "The pay was low, the conditions weren't ideal, and the work left me feeling empty." This collection of circumstances led him to make a choice that many only dream of doing. He quit. In Japan, it is very rare for office workers to change their place of work. Once you start at a company, you are expected to stay until you retire.

He moved on to become certified as a financial planner and eventually joined ARCATH. It was there that he found not just a job, but meaning in his work. Nowadays he helps businesses both large and small get a foothold. When asked how this change made him feel, Mr. Yasui responded, "I feel much more fulfilled in this new job. Being able to help and interact with customers gives me more tangible purpose."

When asked to rate his life satisfaction, Mr. Yasui gave it a 9 out of 10. But despite his personal success, he believes many Japanese people are far from happy. He cites "low average income, rising living costs, and general dissatisfaction with the government" as major issues. Next we asked what he would do to remedy this situation. He answered, "the government should abolish the consumption tax, raise incomes across the board, and support businesses of all sizes."

His experience contrasts with national data in several key ways. While our survey respondents rated income satisfaction at around 5.2 out of 10, Mr. Yasui's career change significantly improved both his earnings and freedom. Both sources agree on one strong point: social support. However, in both data and Mr. Yasui's words, there is a major lack of trust in the government.

In the end, Mr. Yasui's story is more than a personal success. It is a reflection of how individual action, strategic planning, and meaningful work can lead to fulfillment. But it also reminds us that even those who succeed still recognize the bigger challenges affecting society as a whole.

Both the data and Mr. Yasui's story show that happiness in Japan depends on many things. On a personal level, it seems that income and freedom play the biggest role in determining happiness. People like Mr. Yasui, who have more control over their work and time, often feel more satisfied with life. At the same time, strong social support remains one of the most important factors for happiness overall.

Most of the respondents to this survey were young adults. Young people are still in the preliminary stages of building a stable life and have limited control over their lives. It was also noted that they tend to have relatively little awareness of and engagement in politics. Therefore, there are some limitations to the analysis, but certain trends are indicated. On the other hand, personal stories such as Mr. Yasui's help us understand the real meaning behind these trends. Both are necessary to get a complete picture of happiness in Japan today.

By Cosmin-Lucian CIURARU,
Camille P. N. FALGARI,
Mathias G. J. FICQUET,
Zen OSUKA

“Ah, I had it,” “Next time I’m sure I’ll win,” “Wow, I won, awesome!”—From screams of joy to wails of frustration and sorrow, the idea of betting something for the slim chance of riches has always been an attraction to the human mind and continued to evolve, adapting to demands and desires. While gambling is accepted in many Western countries, Japan still shows a strong rejection of legalization. On the other hand, uniquely Japanese forms of “soft gambling,” such as capsule toys, video game centers, and *pachinko* are widespread. We explored what gambling means to Japanese people.

Article 185 of the Japanese Penal Code (promulgated 1907; took effect from October 1908) states that “a person who gambles shall be punished by a fine or a petty fine of not more than ¥500,000, unless the item which is placed on bet is that of momentary amusement.” So in theory, gambling is illegal in Japan. But the second part of the law has created a loophole allowing gambling parlors like pachinko to turn into “amusement houses.” This strategy works as follows: players can exchange pachinko balls for special tokens, usually slips of gold encased in plastic, and then “sell” them at a neighboring shop for cash. This neighboring shop is often owned by the parlor, but as long as the winners do not receive cash in the parlor premises itself, the law is not broken.

Currently, only public races such as horse and bicycle racing and sports promotion lotteries are legal in Japan. Pachinko is only a “game.” Many would have the impression that games in which players win “fake winnings” are an unpopular workaround for those wishing to spend money on such entertainment. However, research has shown that since the parlors reopened after the war, they have been surprisingly profitable. It is therefore no wonder that Japanese culture has so readily integrated the idea of soft gambling into the minds of youth and elders alike. According to The Real Japan, a travel company that offers both relocation services to help people live in Japan and travel services to provide quality experiences for those traveling to Japan, pachinko is so well known that it reaches beyond national borders, allowing lovers of Japanese culture to “dip into pachinko’s waters.”

On the other hand, what defines the popularity of arcade games, which are distinguished from pachinko? We interviewed the manager of a game center in Aeon Mall Nagakute in Nagakute City, Aichi Prefecture, to find out how the arcade is operated. In response to our question about what the concept of an arcade game is, the shop manager said, “It is a bit difficult to clearly define the category of arcade games. In this shop, we deal with many different types of games, such as

Pinballs, Bright Screens & Social Gatherings

SOFT GAMBLING IN JAPAN



card games, panel games, and interactive games. Can we say that all of these are included in the broad concept of arcade games?”

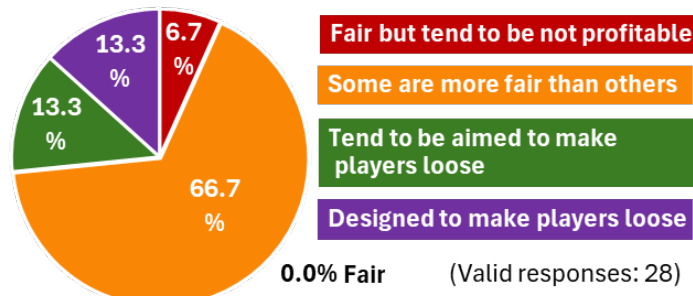
The key question is: what is an arcade game or a game center? According to the Japanese travel and tourism website Kanpai and others, there are approximately 4,000 game centers in Japan. Japan leads the world in arcades. The manager also explained that arcades these days are not just about crane games anymore. “Yes, I think of the games we offer here as a form of entertainment that we provide to our customers. In other words, it’s amusement. We operate with the idea of offering fun, generating revenue, and ensuring that customers enjoy themselves and leave with a smile.”

Arcades, more than anything else, are places of social gathering in Japan. That may be the most important concept here. Similar to cafés and sports bars in Western countries such as France and Romania, these places in Japan do not attract just players, but also people and children of all ages.

Arcades suit this role well, as the manager agreed when we asked about demographics: “We have a wide range of age groups. Of course, small children and families enjoy them, but medal games are especially popular with older customers and housewives.”

Those games look a lot like regular Western casinos. Players sit at slot machines, using tokens to win more and eventually exchange them for a prize. In an arcade such as the one we interviewed, those games often take the shape of casino-like slot machines, blurring the line between amusement and gambling. This is one of the many examples of soft gambling in Japan. By their design, these machines appeal to many older customers. Legally, players don’t win any money, only medals or prizes.

Q: What do you think about arcades and crane games?



es. So is removing the direct money aspect of the game really removing the gambling?

Some argue it is essentially a currency exchange. Players receive medals. They exchange the medals for prizes, then convert those prizes to cash. By narrowing the definition of “gambling” and relying on these cash-out routes, the practice amounts to soft gambling.

One other way for Japan to shape this soft gambling is through the place, the physical meeting area. Creating a diverse environment with a wide range of people helps to trivialize the act. According to Dr. William Kelly in his research “Gambling and Gambling in Japan,” pachinko was at the peak of its popularity in 1994, when “as many as 30 million people could be described regular patrons.” And in 1999, Japan’s 16,000-plus pachinko parlors took in an astonishing ¥30 trillion (nearly US\$300 billion) in bets and accounted for 40% of the total leisure market, restaurants and bars included.

“The age group can vary significantly depending on the type of machine,” the manager explained. Maintaining such a diverse crowd requires constantly updating games and layouts to match trends. For casual players coming once or twice a month, the games are packed with adrenaline from the experience alone. But that raises the question of how to engage more regular players.

The manager added, “There are several ways we try to offer something fresh for our regulars. One of the main things we focus on is the prizes in the crane games. Since new prizes arrive every week, we try to adjust the settings and the

way they are displayed so that customers can enjoy them as soon as possible.”

We often associate arcades and crane games with rigged chances. So why do people play them? We conducted an online survey asking NUFS students and others what they thought about arcades and crane games.

◀ **Western Dream coin-pushing game**
(Round 1, Nagakute City, Aichi Pref.)

According to the survey, 66.7% of respondents think that there is some fairness to them, while only 13% find them unfair. This suggests that the majority of people know that arcades are made to be profitable but do not feel bothered by it. An anonymous Japanese person in their twenties told us in an interview, “I think it’s a game we play on weekends or after school, a fun activity. Many people around me play it,” confirming that arcades are seen more like a social place than anything else.

Capsule-toy vending machines—known in Japan as *gacha*, with Gashapon being Bandai’s trademarked brand—are another example of Japan’s entanglement with soft gambling. Becoming popular in the 1960s, these machines sell capsules with small items such as tiny toys, keychains, pouches, and figures, for a few hundred yen. With a combination of being easily available at every corner, as well as conventionally cheap and having something for everyone, it is no wonder that the business massively grew into the juggernaut it is today. It is so influential that the concept of *gacha* has infiltrated the digital market, with many phone games having a similar mechanic to Gashapon. They are free-to-play games with in-game currency that can be bought and used to try and obtain digital characters or items players want. And unlike pachinko, which has an 18+ restriction, Gashapon and most digital *gacha* do not. That means that any young kid or teenager can simply head to an arcade and spend hundreds of coins for the chance of winning something they deem of value. For example, a 2025 study by researcher Ji Woo Han, “Effects of Mobile Gacha Games on Gambling Behavior and Psychological Health,” links online games with impulse buying and instant gratification.

As you can see, gambling has and always will be an integral part of Japan’s culture, for better or worse. Despite the market showing a significant decline in recent years, Japan’s traditional soft gambling like pachinko and arcades, combined with its accessibility and exclusivity continues to make soft gambling an ever surviving machine in the industry. From the constant evolution of pachinko to the immense boom of digital gambling that evolved past the Asian market, soft gambling is a clear evolution of what the games of luck originally were in the beginning. Despite its decline in the physical form, technological advances have introduced a new era for this business.

By Shu-Ning HSU,
Aisha M. A. QUADRELLI,
Luis E. VEGA

In recent years, matcha-flavored products have become popular worldwide. From cafés and sweet shops to ice cream parlors and fast-food chains with limited-time items, the jade-green staple has become a favorite among young people. How does the phenomenon of matcha, an icon of Japanese culture that has gone global on TikTok, strike the right balance between respect for traditional Japanese roots and contemporary trends in tea culture? We visited Nishio City in Aichi Prefecture, Japan's largest producer of matcha tea, to discover its background story.

Matcha can be enjoyed in its traditional tea form or as a trendy, picture-perfect parfait. In a stylish café filled with young adults catching up with friends or students studying, one thing remains constant: Everyone wants a visually appealing drink or treat in front of them. Sharing photos and videos of a cute beverage with vivid green color on social media has become one of the most popular ways to show a good day—and it also provides free advertising for the café. Even in the major matcha-producing municipality of Nishio, the local matcha museum embraces this new cultural wave, offering sweet matcha cakes and small gift cookies in its shop.

To trace the origins of matcha products, we must look to China, where tea grinding and brewing practices were introduced to Japan in 1191 via Buddhist exchanges. Much of the cultural and spiritual significance of matcha comes from its use by Buddhist monks as a meditative aid. Drinking matcha became popular among aristocrats and the elite, and growing demand turned tea cultivation into an important part of Japan's cultural and economic development. These Buddhist and high-culture origins helped matcha drinking become a cornerstone of Japanese tradition, eventually spreading to common people during the Edo Period (1603–1868).

This history leads us to Aichi's own Nishio City, which proudly refers to itself as "Little Kyoto." Nishio produces a quarter of Japan's matcha, with 90% of its tea grown specifically for matcha. The Saijoen Matcha Museum in Nishio showcases the city's rich heritage, the careful process of matcha production, and the ceremonial customs surrounding the drink. Interestingly, Nishio was not originally a center for matcha, which meant it wasn't constrained by the same cultural boundaries as older tea-producing regions. Matcha in Nishio was never just about tea. In fact, cultivation of *tencha*, the leaves that are ground to make matcha, did not take off in the area until the early 20th century. AIYA, a matcha company founded in Nishio in 1888 and the creator of the Saijoen brand, helped pioneer this shift. To compete in an established market, AIYA advanced *tencha* production and expanded matcha's use beyond beverages and into food

MATCHA IN MOTION

Preserving Tradition in a Globalized World



At the Saijoen Matcha Museum, visitors can watch the process of matcha production.

Above: A view of the factory's automatic matcha production room.

Right: Grading of tea leaves based on texture, leaf color, aroma, etc.

Below: Experience tea mill grinding—all photographed in Nishio City, Aichi Pref.



products.

In an interview with the curator of the Saijoen Matcha Museum, a major theme was Nishio's adaptability in today's changing matcha industry. When asked about the museum's founding vision and cultural goals, the curator emphasized the need to distinguish between "matcha as a product" and "the cultural practice of tea ceremonies." While many assume they are the same, they are not. "Our museum possesses knowledge of matcha's cultural and historical significance. However, our mission does not focus on conveying this aspect," the curator explained.

The museum's design supports this idea. While there are short explanations about matcha history, the main focus is on immersive, hands-on experiences. Visitors can observe different grades of tea leaves, sample them, use a grinder to turn *tencha* into matcha, and participate in tea ceremonies on tatami mats. This mix of experiences highlights the difference between tradition and modern use. Leaves are categorized into three grades: Grade A is used for high-quality drinking matcha, while Grade C becomes the base for matcha-flavored foods and store-bought drinks. Each grade serves its own purpose.

Tours are small, usually ranging from two to three families. Each tour lasts about 75 minutes, and the museum runs up to three tours per

day. Focusing on hands-on experiences leaves a lasting impression: grinding matcha on a millstone, learning from passionate artisans, and savoring it as it was enjoyed centuries ago.

Matcha's popularity has spread worldwide, especially in regions with strong social media influence and a taste for trends. When asked about this global reach, the curator gave a thoughtful, open-minded answer: "As a beverage, matcha has connected with and fused into the food cultures of various countries. This is not a mistake—it is an evolution. This evolution shows the possibilities of matcha. Just because a particular form of consumption is not traditional does not mean it should be dismissed."

This reflects AIYA's original philosophy of embracing new forms that matcha could take. Expanding matcha's reach does not undermine its traditional roots—it broadens its appeal. Matcha endures precisely because it evolves to meet new markets and audiences. Like any product, if it does not sell, it risks disappearing. To keep matcha relevant, the museum and the city support new matcha-based innovations alongside the traditional. According to the curator, the museum's aim is not to teach the essence of matcha in depth, but to show visitors how to simply enjoy it and appreciate its rich flavors.

The growth of matcha does not come without challenges. There have been many reports regarding Japan's struggle to keep up with the increasing demand for matcha on a global scale. As experienced and

seen in the Saijoen Matcha Museum, the creation of matcha takes time and skill. According to tea suppliers, grinding 1 gram of matcha with a traditional stone mill typically takes around 1–2 minutes. However, producing larger quantities, such as 30–40 grams, can take up to an entire hour. The process also requires precision and delicacy; if done too quickly or roughly, the *tencha* can be damaged and ruin the quality.

Matcha is evolving with the times, and in doing so, it demonstrates the dynamic nature of culture itself. The goal is not necessarily to preserve every single detail of tradition, but to strike a balance, helping people appreciate where it came from while embracing its modern-day transformations. In today's fast-paced, globalized world, cultural relevance is everything. Like the matcha industry, history shows us that other industries have always adapted to trends to capture attention or increase engagement. Shrines and temples are another piece of traditional Japanese culture that have adapted to modern times, sometimes collaborating with popular anime series and allowing photo shoots for weddings and kimono rentals.

What we see now is a blend of old and new. While matcha may not be at the very heart of Japan's historical evolution or even the focal point of its most sacred tea ceremonies, it still provides a tangible connection to Japan's rich culture. As social media and rapid globalization knit the world closer, matcha has outgrown its ceremonial niche, becoming a key export and a conduit for Japanese aesthetics and the Japan brand. The everyday consumption of Japanese products markets Japan's cultural and national identity, increasing tourism and international favorability. From AIYA's early innovations in bringing matcha to a broader audience, to the Saijoen Matcha Museum's forward-thinking approach today, one thing remains consistent: The essence of matcha culture is unchanged. It's not the tradition itself that's evolving—it's the ways in which it is experienced.

The modernization of matcha represents something larger: The way cultural traditions can be reimagined, reinterpreted, and celebrated in ways that resonate across borders and eras. It is a conversation between generations, cultures, and people from all walks of life, and it is one that continues to flourish in the most unexpected places. The curator of the Saijoen Matcha Museum put it this way: "To me, matcha is a drink I can introduce with confidence. That confidence does not come from its traditional status, but from its inherently attractive qualities. No matter how many new ways of using it are developed, that essence will remain unchanged." Whether it's a matcha latte on a café menu in New York or a traditional tea ceremony in Kyoto, both serve the same purpose: They invite us to connect to the past, to each other, and to the evolving world around us.



By Samuel G. R. BAILLY,
Martyn C. JONES,
Rebecca E. MEADE,
Kiyoha TANAKA

THE MYTH BEHIND THE MASK

Japanese Festivals Keep Ancient Legends Alive

From dancing dragons to sacred flames, Japanese festivals are pulsating with echoes of ancient mythology. These ancient stories have shaped seasonal rituals, local customs, and communal identity. About 100,000 festivals are held in Japan each year, the majority of which are rooted in *Shintō* and Buddhist traditions. Yet amid of rapid modernization, the place of mythology in everyday life has been questioned. We went behind the drum beats to find the pulse of Japanese festivals: the organizers who keep tradition alive today.

Today, cities and towns across Japan, from Hokkaido to Kagoshima, burst into a kaleidoscope of color and light. Streets transform into enchanted corridors where slender bamboo stalks sway under the weight of dreams, their branches dressed in a flurry of vivid *tanzaku*—paper rectangles of crimson, sapphire, gold, and jade—each scrawled with whispered wishes. Under a canopy of glowing lanterns and shimmering streamers, couples stroll hand in hand while children dart between stalls, their *yukata* swishing as they catch goldfish or nibble on candied apples. Streamers, paper cranes, and *origami* stars hang overhead, turning stores and streets into tunnels of color. The colorful paper strips flutter like confetti in the summer breeze, each one bearing handwritten wishes tied to towering bamboo branches lining the streets.

These wishes range from romantic hopes to future dreams, reflecting *Tanabata* festival's blend of personal aspiration and shared heritage. Schools and community centers hold Tanabata workshops, while local businesses join in with themed decorations and many shrines conduct their own festivals. Celebrated widely on July 7, the festival is joyous with drums, lanterns, and fireworks—yet, like many festivals, it has felt the pull of over-commercialization.

Tanabata, one of Japan's most widely celebrated summer festivals, traces its origins to a Chinese folktale brought to Japan during the Heian period (794–1185). The story centers on Orihime, a princess, and Hikoboshi, a cowherd, who fell in love and neglected their heavenly duties as a result. According to the legend, they are separated across the Milky Way, also known as *Amanogawa*, allowed to meet only once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. In China, it is tied to the lunar calendar, but in Japan, it is often marked on the Gregorian calendar (Brown & Brown, 2006). To understand how attitudes are changing, we interviewed two Shintō priests connected



responded that they did not practice the Shintō religion, the festival's original focal point. Tanabata is a clear example of aesthetics becoming spectacle—its imagery foregrounded while its religious roots recede.

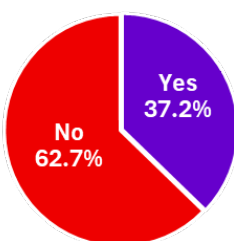
Brilliantly colored Tanabata decorations hang at the shrine. As usual, many people visited this year's festival. Ichinomiya City, Aichi Pref.

Across much of the Western world, the deeper meanings behind traditional holidays are increasingly fading from public consciousness, as previously religious events like Christmas and Easter transform into largely secular celebrations centered on consumerism, leisure, and social gatherings. For many, these holidays are now marked more by gift-giving, festive meals, and time off work than by their

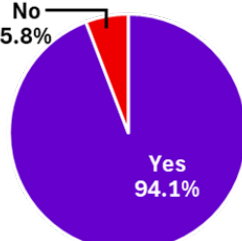
original religious significance. This shift reflects broader trends in secularization and cultural adaptation: Rituals persist, but their spiritual roots are often forgotten or deemed irrelevant. A similar pattern appears in Japan with Tanabata festival. Once tied to star deities and seasonal agricultural rites, it has gradually evolved into a romantic and recreational summer event shaped by commercial interests. Its colorful imagery and festive atmosphere make it ideal for marketing, merchandising, and tourism. What endures is the desire to connect—whether to others, with tradition, or with something larger than ourselves—even as the ways we connect evolve.

The Tanabata festival illustrates how traditional events in Japan are adapting to modern life, balancing cultural preservation with contemporary reinterpretation. While its origins lie in a centuries-old folktale about star-crossed lovers, today it is often celebrated more for its colorful decorations, festive atmosphere, and social appeal than for its spiritual meaning. Our research shows that while many young people still attend Tanabata events, most are unaware of the festival's historical or religious background. For many, the appeal lies in gathering with friends, enjoying seasonal foods, sharing the experience on social media, and writing wishes on vibrant paper strips. This shift mirrors a global trend in which traditional holidays become less about sacred stories and more about shared experiences. Yet this evolution does not necessarily diminish the value of such festivals. Vivid decorations, joyful crowds, and atmospheric streets still captivate the senses, while the act of decorating bamboo and making wishes subtly links people to a shared cultural heritage. Even if the myths and spiritual messages fade from memory, festivals like Tanabata endure as living traditions—not fixed relics of the past, but adaptable rituals that reflect the values, hopes, and rhythms of each new generation.

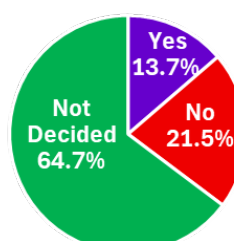
Q: Do you know the origins and history of Tanabata?



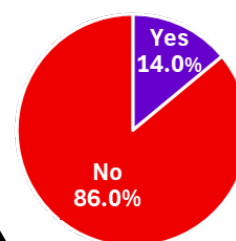
Q: Have you ever participated in Tanabata festivals and events?



Q: Will you participate in Tanabata festivals and events this year?



Q: Tanabata is a festival related to Shintō. Is your religion Shintō?



(Valid responses: 51)

to the Tanabata celebration.

At Hoshi Shrine in Nagoya, a 200-year-old shrine dedicated to deities of match-making and stars, we spoke with Mr. Shintaro Kojima, a priest of the shrine. He explained Tanabata's origins as a star festival over 1,000 years ago, evolving into its current form during the Edo period (1603–1868). Mr. Kojima emphasized the festival's dual nature: both a religious expression of gratitude and a secular, community-centered event. He noted that Tanabata encourages people to pause and reflect, saying, "For those who are usually too busy to look up to the sky, it provides a good opportunity to gaze at the heavens." Hoshi Shrine's annual festivals draw 100–200 visitors, with pre-COVID-19 numbers even higher. These events blend traditional prayers with performances and songs by local children, making them cherished local traditions.

We also spoke with Mr. Isao Ito, a member of the Tanabata Shrine Representatives Association, who is actively working to preserve and revitalize Tanabata. He noted that the festival was once a major household event, but individual participation has declined. In response, the association organizes engaging shrine events such as games, ceremonies, and wish collections to make Tanabata more accessible and enjoyable. Mr. Ito likened modern perceptions of the festival to how Westerners view Christmas or Halloween—less religious, more cultural and festive.



Left: Mr. Kojima, a priest at Hoshi Shrine, explains the Tanabata festival. Nagoya City, Aichi Pref.

In a recent survey conducted among Japanese youth, responses to the question of whether they would attend a Tanabata festival this year revealed a wide spectrum of motivations and hesitations. Some participants expressed enthusiasm for the event, loving festivals, wanting to enjoy food stalls with friends, and appreciating seasonal culture. Others cited practical or personal reasons for staying away. "If my schedule is free, I'd like to go and spend time with friends," one respondent shared, reflecting a common wish to connect socially during the summer tradition. For many, the festival holds little religious meaning. Instead, it is seen simply as a fun seasonal activity. One answer noted, "If I made a promise to a friend, I'll go," while another said they would go "because events like this are fun."

We then asked questions with the intent of finding out to what extent Tanabata participants have an understanding of the festival and its origins. From our responses, 94.1% said they have attended Tanabata-related events or festivals, and 13.7% were certain they would take part this year. Additionally, 62.8% of people admitted that they did not know the origins or original story of the Tanabata festival. This aligns with earlier research suggesting that younger generations participate more for a sense of togetherness rather than the festival's underlying story. Furthermore, a large number of our participants (86%)

By Shane T. ADAMS,
Bethany G. KUBE,
Alexandre LEMAY

Once a sign of social outcasts, tattoos are gradually gaining acceptance among younger Japanese generations, but strict rules and old mindsets keep the stigma alive. Tattooing is a traditional practice that has been around since the beginning of Japan's recorded history. Many Japanese have traditionally viewed tattoos with distaste, but is this still the case in 2025? We set out to investigate the changing mindset of tattoos in Japan by contacting a tattoo artist and students at NUFS to gather a wide range of perspectives.

Irezumi is the most common term used for tattoos, and its meaning has changed over the years: at times a brand of crime association, at others a mark chosen of one's own free will. The majority of Japanese society links tattoos to crime and punishment. They are viewed as undesirable because they have been associated with the *yakuza*, an antisocial organization.

To understand a wide variety of opinions on the topic, a survey was conducted among 82 NUFS students. Of these respondents, 61 were from Japan, and the rest were international students. 70% of all respondents believe attitudes toward tattoos in Japan are shifting. On one hand, some students think this shift is happening because tattoos can be aesthetically appealing. On the other hand, some answered that tattoos are scary, linked to criminals, or that there are no advantages to having one when living in Japanese society. Japanese and foreign youth are becoming interested in tattoos, but stigma still hurts their reputation.

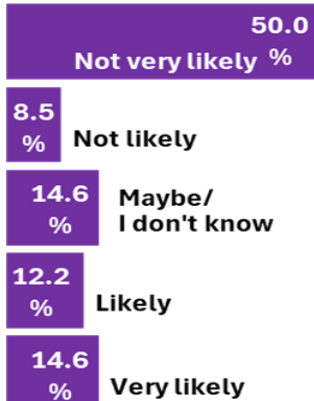
Mr. Ryuichi Sato, a tattoo artist and NUFS student, recently completed a *koi* fish design. In Japan, this type of fish is a common symbol of resilience and ambition, inspired by the legend of the *koi* swimming upstream to become a dragon. This legend speaks to tattoos in Japanese society and their complex place as symbols of history, culture, art, spirituality, and—for some—crime. The tattoo artist is a member of this younger generation that is becoming open-minded about tattoos as body art and is breaking away from the influence of past associations with crime.

This mindset is shared by a minority in Japan. Mr. Sato mentioned, "although the image of tattoos in the Japanese mind is evolving, it is still badly viewed by many." "I have only been judged once, and it was by a teacher," he said with a sad

A TATTOOED DIVIDE: Forging Perspectives Under the Influence of Tradition



Q: What is the likelihood of you getting a tattoo in the future?



(For NUFS students
valid responses: 82)

Left=Tattoo artist Mr. Sato's recent work, representing resilience and ambition inspired by legend of the koi fish

Below=Interview with Mr. Sato (second from the left)



smile. "They said I can't go to heaven if I have tattoos on my body." These types of comments remind us why tattooed people feel the need to hide them.

From the survey conducted among NUFS students, about 50% said that they felt the need to hide their tattoos. We also asked Mr. Sato if he had ever felt the need to hide a tattoo. The young artist replied, "at times, when I go to very specific and traditional places, such as the *onsen* (hot spring), I must hide the full body designs." "The way that I cover my tattoos is by wearing long sleeves," he explained. Mr. Sato has been getting tattooed since reaching the legal age.

Youth protection ordinances prohibit minors under the age of 18 from having a tattoo on their body. In 2020, the Supreme Court ruled that tattooing is not a medical act, freeing tattoo artists from doctor-license requirements. However, according to the Osaka Chuo Clinic, the restriction on tattooing for minors is mostly due to medical reasons. For instance, the ink may affect the liver and create severe health issues.

Even though this consequence can also happen to people over 18, parents of Japanese children who receive a tattoo could be punished under the Child Welfare Act, as minors should not modify their body before the age of majority.

Mr. Sato's clientele "[...] are young

adults in their 20s and older." Among them, many come to his shop for a second or a third tattoo, since they enjoy Mr. Sato's art style. "The person who has come to my shop the most has received five or six tattoos," explained the artist with enthusiasm. People in Japan who get a tattoo may face ostracism, so having more than one does not necessarily change how they are treated. For this reason, it is easy for customers to come back to the tattoo shop.

When asked if anyone had ever come to remove a tattoo, he answered, "Not really." "The only reason why someone had requested to remove a tattoo was to move the picture to another place on their body" he specified. Considered as "cleaning up their act," removing a tattoo is not of interest among Mr. Sato's customers.

Tattoos that cover the entire body are largely a relic of the past, mainly because of the association these images have with the *yakuza*. According to Mr. Sato, "small normal tattoos are more accepted in Japanese society." To check this perception against campus opinion, we looked at the survey results.

In our survey of 82 NUFS students, the results confirm that deep-seated social and cultural perceptions continue to shape how tattoos are viewed and whether individuals choose to get them at all. 89% of respondents reported that they do

not have any tattoos. Among these, nearly half of all participants said it was "not very likely" that they would ever consider getting one. While younger generations have shown increasing interest in global trends, including Western-style tattoo culture, this data suggests that for many in Japan, tattoos remain something to admire from a distance rather than adopt personally.

Several key factors contribute to the general hesitance. One of the most frequently cited is the issue of access: Many public facilities in Japan still enforce strict policies against visible tattoos. Pools, gyms, hot springs, and even some beaches may deny entry to those with tattoos, regardless of size or subject matter. These rules, often enforced with little room for negotiation, present a major inconvenience for anyone with ink, effectively discouraging people from taking the leap in the first place.

Another factor lies in the historical association between tattoos and the *yakuza*, Japan's organized crime syndicates. Although this link has become less relevant among younger, more globally connected generations, the sentiment remains strong among older generations. For decades, tattoos served as a symbol of gang affiliation, and that visual shorthand remains powerful in the public imagination. As a result, even innocent designs can attract suspicion or unease from older generations or more conservative members of society.

Workplace expectations also play a significant role. In a country where conformity and group harmony are highly valued, personal expression through body modification is seen as risky. Many employers still maintain unspoken or explicitly stated rules discouraging visible tattoos, particularly in client-facing roles. This cultural norm can limit employment opportunities or create discomfort in professional settings, adding another layer of deterrence for those who might otherwise be interested in getting inked.

While Japan is not without its tattoo enthusiasts, the survey results highlight a cautious and conflicted national stance. Some respondents did indicate curiosity or appreciation for tattoo art, especially when it comes to international styles or traditional Japanese designs like *irezumi*. But admiration doesn't necessarily translate to action.

When it comes to tattoos in Japan, there has been a slow shift toward a positive image among younger people. This newfound relative acceptance does not change society's refusal to make them more present. After all, there are still locations that ban tattoos altogether, not only for Japanese but also for foreigners. Until these restrictions are lifted in Japan, one can assume that the general public will continue to associate tattoos with negative connotations because of older mindsets. Young generations will continue to be influenced by these opinions in a future where social homogeneity may persist over individual expression.

The NUFS Times

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